

# The Dark Side of Jesus People USA, America's Most Influential Christian Movement

For decades, the freewheeling hippies of Jesus People USA — "God's forever family" — forged one of the most influential movements in Christianity. They were also Jaime Prater's family, until he made a documentary exposing the commune's darkest secrets.

By Jesse Hyde

**Usually, Jaime Prater** felt excited on the first day of school. He'd get up early, put on the outfit he'd laid out the night before — he liked bow ties and sweater-vests — and hurry down the hall with the other kids in his building. But this morning in September 1989 felt different. This morning he was starting the eighth grade, and he felt something closer to dread.

For as long as he could remember, Prater had lived here among the Jesus People, about two blocks from the "L" train in Uptown Chicago. At first he had loved it, but things had changed since he turned 10. Lately he would lie awake at night, his window open to the muggy summer air, listening to the rattle of the train, and dream of escape.

Or he'd try to imagine the commune's early years, back when they caravanned across the Midwest in an old school bus, the word "Jesus" painted in big, loopy letters on the side, winning souls for Christ. He loved hearing the stories from that time: the mass baptisms in the woods, the early members tracting at O'Hare among the Hare Krishnas, everyone strumming their guitars and singing early Christian rock back on the bus, enraptured with the glow of the Holy Spirit.



Friendly Towers in Chicago.  
Google Maps

By the time Prater was born, the Jesus People had stopped touring and had transformed a dilapidated apartment building on Chicago's North Side into the Friendly Towers, where all 400 of them lived in communal bliss, sharing meals, clothes, and pretty much everything else. They were God's forever family, just like the Bible taught.

Prater's dad had an Afro back then, and his mom spoke of Jesus, peace, and love to whoever would listen; they had been legit hippies, Prater liked to think. But now they were different, stooped and beaten down by middle age, resigned to their middling status in the commune's rigid hierarchy: His mom taught in the Jesus People school, and his dad worked as a mechanic. Prater hoped for some other kind of job when he grew up — maybe helping with the Cornerstone Festival — but that wasn't up to him. The nine-person leadership council, half of them blood-related, decided everything — even whom he'd marry.

He wanted to believe the council spoke for God, but already he had his doubts. He'd heard dark and ugly rumors about their founder, a bearded Messiah-like figure, and he'd heard stories that horrified him about the Farm, a remote and secluded resort in the Missouri woods. But he knew better than to ask about any of that.

And yet, for as much as he tried to keep his troubles to himself, something was amiss. For weeks, he'd caught his parents whispering about him. He figured it had something to do with the day one of the men in the commune touched him. Prater had tried to forget that moment, the feeling of terror that washed over him, the searing shame when it was over, but he couldn't move past it. Since then, he had been acting out in strange ways, desires he couldn't control aroused inside him. Eventually he told the council, and now he wished he'd never said anything at all.

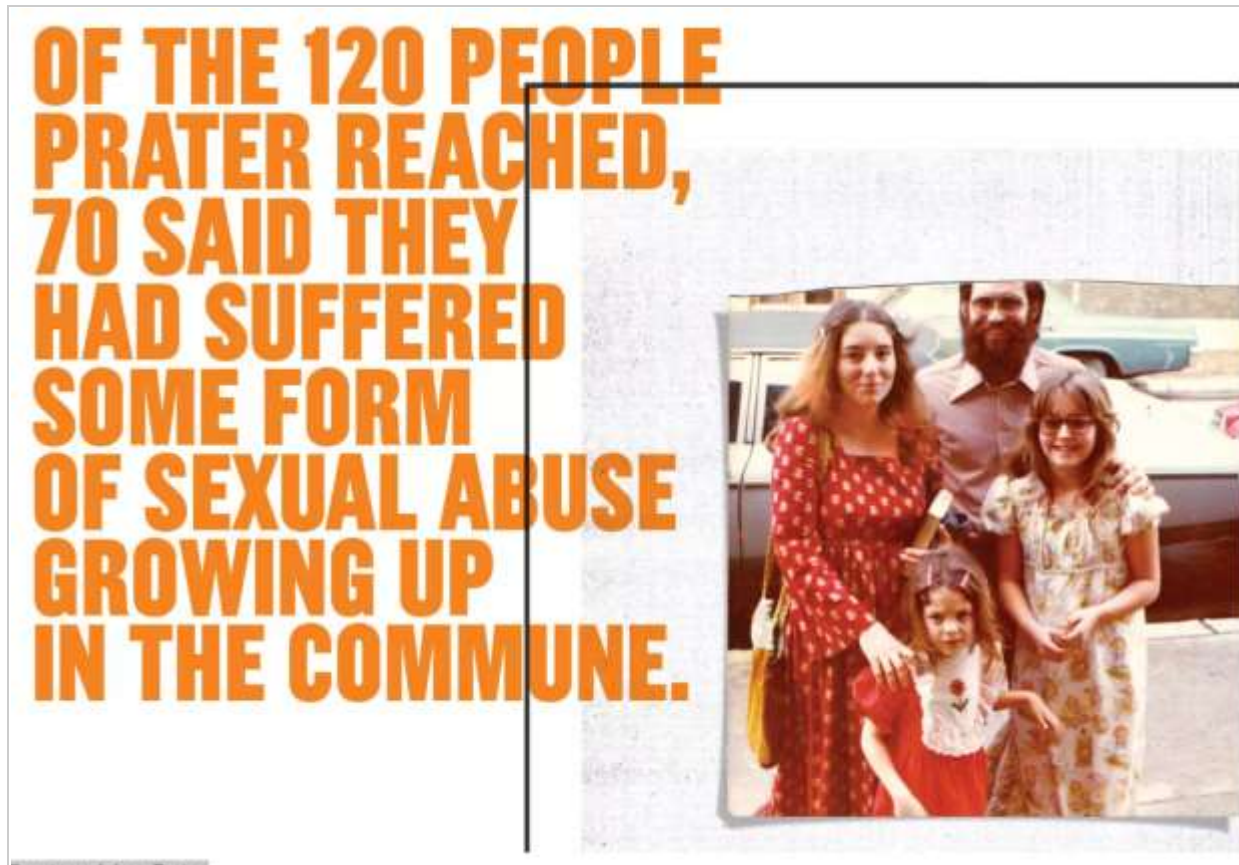
He watched his dad in the kitchen, sipping his coffee and listening to the morning news on the radio. Outside, the Chicago morning loomed dark and gray. When it was time to go, his dad motioned for him to follow and they headed past the other Jesus People kids crowding the hallways and stepped into the cool morning air.

They crossed the street, damp with rain, and walked a few blocks until they came to a towering castle-like building known as Magnolia. This was where new families were sent. His dad nudged him softly toward the door. He wouldn't look down at his son, who begged him to not make him go inside.

On that morning, Prater's isolation began. Over the next two years it would increase until he was forbidden from contact with anyone in the commune outside of his parents and his brother and sister. He took his meals in his parents' room, but he spent his days alone at Magnolia, tutored in a broom closet

and shunned from the other children, who were instructed to never speak with him again.

“I didn’t understand it at the time, but they were trying to keep me quiet,” Prater says today. “They still are.”



Angel Harold and family

Courtesy Jaime Prater

**It’s a warm spring morning** in Chicago, and Prater is seated at a Starbucks not far from Friendly Towers. For the first time in years, he’s visiting the neighborhood where he grew up. He’s gone a few days without shaving and his beard is coming in gray in spots, but he appears youthful, his face unlined, his eyes dark and expressive. He adjusts the stocking cap on his head and fiddles with his watch, scanning the window to see who might be passing by. He’s visibly nervous to be here. “I know logically that doesn’t make sense,” he says. “It’s not like someone is going to come attack me. But it almost gives me a panic attack being here.”

In 2014, Prater self-released *No Place To Call Home*, a film documenting his years inside Jesus People, one of the strangest and longest-running religious experiments in American history. The church in which Prater grew up, officially called Jesus People USA, is one of the final vestiges of what may be the last great religious revival in

America. Known as the Jesus Movement, it swept up as many as 3 million people in the late 1960s, many of them burned-out hippies who felt disillusioned by the free-love and drugs ethos and ached for some kind of spirituality outside the confines of traditional Christianity.

The movement spawned hundreds of religious communes across the country, including Calvary Chapel, one of the largest and most influential megachurches in America today, as well as the Children of God, the notorious sex cult that once claimed as followers Joaquin Phoenix, Rose McGowan, and Jeremy Spencer, one of the original members of Fleetwood Mac. Most of these communes collapsed within a few years. Jesus People USA, which today has about 300 members, is one of the largest that has survived.

The influence of the Jesus People movement on evangelical Christianity is profound. “It gave birth to Christian rock,” says David Di Sabatino, who made a documentary about Lonnie Frisbee and the Jesus People movement called *Frisbee: The Life and Death of a Hippie Preacher*. “The contemporary Christian music industry wouldn’t exist without the Jesus People.”

For much of its history, Jesus People USA hosted one of the largest Christian rock festivals in America, called Cornerstone, launching Christian bands that would go mainstream in the '90s, like MxPx and P.O.D. “Nearly every megachurch in America has a youth outreach arm that’s been influenced by the Jesus People movement,” says Larry Eskridge, author of *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America*. “You see it in the way they dress, in the kind of music they use. All of that, you can trace back to the influence of the Jesus Movement.”

When Prater set out to make his film, he didn’t have any professional experience; he simply wanted to explore what it was like growing up in a religious commune. He raised some money on Kickstarter and set out across the country, reconnecting with kids he’d known growing up, capturing their stories on film. What he found shocked him. While the broader Christian community has long been aware of allegations of strange behavior from within the walls of JPUSA, such as adult spankings and group confessionals of masturbation, few outside the commune knew of its darker secrets.

Of the 120 people Prater reached over two years, 70 said they had suffered some form of sexual abuse growing up in the commune. One woman told him of a trip to the Farm, the 300-acre JPUSA retreat in Doniphan, Missouri, where she said she was sexually assaulted by one of the commune’s leaders. Another said he had been forced to perform oral sex on two men in the Leland Building, the Jesus People dorm for single men. Prater found that



MxPx (left) and P.O.D. (right) playing at the Cornerstone Music Festival.

the Jesus People leadership had not only been aware of dozens of complaints of abuse, but had conspired to hide those crimes and silence the victims.

When Prater finished the film and [posted it on Vimeo](#), it went nowhere: Only a few hundred people saw it, and Prater didn't submit it to any festivals or distributors. "I didn't want people to think this was about me, or that I was doing this to get famous," Prater says. But within the walls of JPUSA, and the broader Christian world, it was a bombshell. Prior to the film, no one, other than perhaps JPUSA leadership, had known about allegations of widespread sexual abuse or possible cover-ups. Suddenly, Prater had cast himself into the uncomfortable role of whistleblower.

The fallout was swift: One of the members of the leadership council, who also functioned as their in-house attorney, left with his family shortly before the film was released. Two more council members, including the son of the founder, would follow. JPUSA seemed to be crumbling from within.

Today, the remaining members of JPUSA (pronounced juh-POO-za by the faithful) live in the same apartment buildings where Prater grew up. They are officially part of the Evangelical Covenant Church, a prestigious and well-respected Christian denomination based in Chicago that serves as an umbrella organization for 800 churches across the country. Shortly after the film's release, 18 members, including Prater, filed a lawsuit against JPUSA and



Jesus People USA and their broken-down bus, 1973  
Chicago Tribune via Newscom

the ECC, seeking damages for the abuse they suffered. The lawsuit is in mediation, and several attorneys related to the suit called me and advised me not to speak to their clients. JPUSA leadership declined to speak to me for this article, despite repeated requests, as did their attorney. Only Edward Gilbreath, the executive director of communications for the ECC, would say anything. He stressed that while JPUSA was a member congregation of the ECC, it was an "autonomous self-governing organization" that made its own rules. "We take these matters very seriously," he told me. "And we're concerned for all parties involved, but beyond that I can't comment."

Prater says he's paid a heavy price for what he's brought to light. It's cost him a relationship, a job, and lifelong friendships, and severed any remaining ties to where he grew up.



“It’s almost like I’m attacking my family, the only home I ever knew,” Prater says back at Starbucks. We’ve been talking for more than an hour, but he’s still skittish, looking over my shoulder every few minutes to see if anyone from JPUSA is passing by. “I really struggled with speaking up, with documenting what I found, because it was so disturbing to me, and so painful to relive. But someone had to tell the truth. Someone had to tell the story of what happened there.”

**Everyone who grew up in** Friendly Towers knew the whitewashed version of their history, but few knew their real story.

The Jesus People movement started in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco, in the late 1960s with a man named Lonnie Frisbee, who liked to read the Bible while tripping on LSD, and David Berg, the sex-crazed madman who led the Huntington Beach, California-based Children of God.

Frisbee would become one of the most influential members of the movement. Blessed with long golden hair and a face that looked vaguely messianic, he had dabbled in the underground gay scene in Laguna Beach, California, before emerging as a hippie preacher who could speak in tongues. His ministry at Orange County’s Calvary Chapel was an earthy, back-to-basics rebuke of what Christianity had become, an open-arms embrace of the longhairs, the stoned, and the barefoot not welcome at mainline denominations.



Lonnie Frisbee  
[lonniefrisbee.com](http://lonniefrisbee.com)

Calvary Chapel, the All Saved Freak Band, and groups like Children of God turned the Jesus Movement into a mass phenomenon, culminating at a Christian rock festival at the Dallas Cotton Bowl in 1972 that drew as many as 200,000 people (including Mike Huckabee) to hear Johnny Cash sing gospel and Billy Graham, the most famous preacher in America, deliver a sermon proclaiming them a special generation.

“We felt like we were part of this big movement,” says Micki Johnson, who joined JPUSA at the age of 18. “The free love, the drugs, it had left us disillusioned, and we weren’t going to find what we were looking for in the traditional church. Here was this thing that talked about the love of Jesus, but you didn’t have to cut your hair or shave your beard. You could come as you are.”

In 1969, an early member of the movement named Jim Palosaari left the Haight scene for Seattle, where he fell in with a group that called itself the Jesus People Army. He stayed for a year until he became concerned over the growing influence of the Children of God, which advocated using sex to gain converts. (Its leader, known to his followers as King David, would later encourage incest and pedophilia among members of his cult and would bed dozens of his followers, often in group orgies.)

Alarmed at the direction the Jesus People Army and the Children of God had taken, Palosaari decamped for Milwaukee. When Palosaari left to evangelize in Europe, a small group of disciples left Milwaukee under the leadership of a man named John Herrin. In time, Herrin would prove a bad fit for the ministry. Already kicked out of several churches for sleeping with female members, he had barely passed seminary. Short and skinny, with black chunky glasses and a long beard, he required \$10 from the communal pot every day, Micki Johnson recalls, for what members would only later learn was used for a bottle of cheap wine and a trip to the porno theater.

“He had three sermons he’d rotate,” Johnson says. “If we said we were bored by them, his wife would say we needed to pay closer attention to understand what God was telling us.”

Yet Johnson and others were only vaguely aware of Herrin’s vices, and the basic appeal of JPUSA remained: Like Jesus and his disciples, they were sacrificing material things to serve the poor and disenfranchised.

“I felt like this is where the Lord had led me,” Johnson recalls. “Jesus had gone to the cross for me; how could I not forsake all my former life and do what he told me? And I believed these were the last days, so you better be doing what he wants you to do when he returns.”

In 1971, Herrin’s group, which would eventually call itself Jesus People USA, began traveling throughout the Midwest and South in their converted school bus, stopping at churches and parks to play impromptu Christian rock concerts, which led to Herrin’s sermons, and hopefully baptisms. “I was so stoked by the teaching, the music, the bold street witnessing,” Johnson recalls. “We saw a lot of miracles, lives changed, people healed and delivered from addiction.” When their bus broke down in Chicago in 1973, a preacher took them in and let them stay the night in the basement of a church. Eventually they bought a nearby apartment building and christened it “Friendly Towers.” The Jesus People had finally found a home.

Mary Prater says she and her husband were attracted to Jesus People for many of the same things that had appealed to Johnson and others. As an interracial couple in the ’70s, they often felt like they didn’t belong anywhere. John Prater had always liked the

idea of communal living, and Mary Prater, disillusioned with the formal worship style of the Catholic Church, wanted something that felt more authentic.

“At the time the Jesus People attracted a lot of kids who were struggling with drugs, kids who came from broken homes, and they were looking for an alternative,” Mary Prater says. “The gospel the Jesus People was preaching was all about God forgiving you and making you whole, and that resonated with me.”

By the time Prater’s parents joined the commune in 1978, John Herrin had been kicked out of the group for making an advance on a female member, and his wife, Dawn Herrin, had taken charge. A willowy, matronly woman uncomfortable in public, she spoke in a soft and gentle tone, masking a towering force of will and thirst for power that could border on obsessive. Known as Mama Dawn, she dressed like a “forever hippie,” as one former member put it, wearing her hair long and layering her outfits with scarves like Stevie Nicks.

Early members say that after the ouster of her husband, Mama Dawn feared losing control of the group. She implemented a strict authoritarian structure known as the Shepherding Movement, a form of discipline that became popular among hard-line Christian groups in the 1970s and early '80s. Inspired by a book called *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, which reads like something out of Mao’s China, everyone was assigned a shepherd, or a “buddy,” who in turn answered to a “family” head, who took serious matters to the pastors and the leadership council.

When Prater’s family moved into the Friendly Towers, he was put in a nursery while his parents spent the day out on the streets ministering, handing out pamphlets about grace and forgiveness, or putting on skits about popular Bible stories, like the return of the Prodigal Son.

Prater’s mom felt guilty about leaving her 6-year-old alone all day in the nursery. One night after dinner, she told one of the leaders she was going to skip evening Bible study. She wanted some time with her three kids, whom she’d only seen at communal meals. The leader relented, but Prater realized she wasn’t free to parent the way she wanted. Over time, she would learn her family wasn’t entirely hers.

While Prater still called his parents “Mom” and “Dad,” he unofficially belonged to a larger family headed by a man named Ron Brown, the token black man on the leadership council. The title was more than ceremonial: If the council decided a certain couple wasn’t fit to parent, they would “give” their children to another family, and from




"Mama Dawn" Herrin  
Courtesy Jaime Prater



then on the kids would take that last name, answer to their new mom and dad, and, in some cases, have minimal to no contact with their actual parents.

“You see this sort of behavior in a lot of authoritarian groups,” says [Ianja Lalich](#), who has studied cults for 20 years. “Whether intentional or not, the idea is to break down the family as an autonomous structure to build loyalty. It’s all about loyalty to the leaders. This is textbook cult behavior.”

Early on, Prater’s mother begged her husband to leave, but in some ways they were stuck: They’d donated all their possessions when they joined. Plus, they didn’t actually make any money. Everyone worked for free at JPUSA. The commune now had a growing business empire — a moving company, a recording studio, and the booming Lakefront Roofing and Siding Supply — all of it built on the backs of its members.



**HOMELESS PEOPLE LINED UP  
OUTSIDE FRIENDLY TOWERS  
EVERY DAY FOR A FREE MEAL.  
SOMETIMES THEY WOULD STAY  
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AS CHILDREN.**

Courtesy Jaime Prater

For Mama Dawn’s family and the rest of the council, life was different. Her daughter and son-in-law (a man named Glenn Kaiser) fronted Resurrection Band (“the most influential band in Christian music history,” according to *Christianity Today*), and her

son Johnny Herrin Jr. played drums and ran all the commune's businesses. Another daughter and her husband controlled the commune's finances.

Mary Prater says she couldn't share her doubts with anyone other than her husband, who believed they were doing God's will. If she complained, her "buddy" would eventually catch wind of it and report her to the council. Sometimes, even husbands ratted out wives for "subversive" thoughts. One former member told me that as a teen, she once reported on her mom after finding a romance novel hidden under a bed.

But typically it didn't even have to come to that: Members policed themselves. At the weekly worship services, where deacons passed out grape juice and Hawaiian bread for Communion, public confessions were expected.

"Guys would stand up and confess to masturbation, or a visit to the porn shop," says Chris Harold, a former member who joined the commune in 1986. "It was so humiliating. You would just sit there and think, *I never want to have to do that.*"

How the Jesus People had drifted so far from their stoned West Coast moorings would take early members years to figure out. "A lot of these groups started out really loosey-goosey," says Di Sabatino, the documentary filmmaker. "And then as the community grows you start to have problems. A member does something out of line and so you start having rules and soon the rules start to calcify and you become this thing you never wanted to be."

**When Prater was little**, the Jesus People had phased out many of its most bizarre practices, and he loved his life at Friendly Towers. He felt like he was part of a big family, with dozens of brothers and sisters. They'd play tag in the alleyways while their moms pinned laundry to the wires running between the buildings, splash through the cold water of the fire hydrant on hot summer afternoons, and stay up late in the common room watching old Alfred Hitchcock films projected onto a big white sheet. They played He-Man and Thundercats, had long discussions about *Star Wars*, and built elaborate Lego kingdoms in the hallways. It felt like a summer camp that would never end.

By the mid-'80s, Jesus People USA had staked out a place on the margins of mainstream Christianity, directly at odds with conservative Southern ministries like Pat Robertson's

700 Club or the Southern Baptist Convention. Its pastors dressed like they belonged to a biker gang, had little in common with Republican politics, and played what amounted to Christian heavy metal.

Because of the emphasis JPUSA placed on taking in what they called "the broken" (homeless people, drug addicts, victims of domestic violence), there were always new people around. When Prater was a kid in the late '70s and '80s, homeless people lined up outside Friendly Towers every day at lunch for a free meal; sometimes they would stay the night in the same room as children. While Mama Dawn and the leadership council kept tight control over the daily activities of the Jesus People, they paid little attention to

visitors, placed few controls over their activities, and rarely performed background checks.

“Without intending to, they created the perfect environment for someone to prey on children,” Chris Harold says. “The combination of children being an afterthought because parents were so busy, or in some cases being reassigned to parents who didn’t really know them or care about them, and then absolute strangers just coming in and out of the building — it was a situation ripe for abuse.”

When Prater was 8, two single men were assigned to live in the room he shared with his brother, who was several years older. The boys had decorated it with fish tanks and cages that held rabbits and squirrels. By this point, Prater was used to living with the two men who shared his room and felt as comfortable around them as he did his own brother. One morning when he was 10, he woke up with an erection. Unaware of the concept of masturbation, he pulled his pants down and began innocently exploring his body.

Across the room, one of the single men who lived there noticed his actions. He stopped getting ready for work and walked over to Prater’s bed. Within the commune, he was one of the favorites. He had dark hair and deep blue eyes. Because of his good looks, he often appeared in the pages of *Cornerstone Magazine*. He and his brother had both been dropped off at Friendly Towers as children and raised by one of the pastors. Without warning, he began fondling Prater, which went on for several minutes.



Cornerstone magazine

"I sat there, frozen," Prater says. "I was feeling something I had never felt before, and it was confusing, because it felt good, but it was also terrifying because I had no control over what he'd do next."

Prater didn't know if he had done anything wrong, but the encounter aroused something inside him. Not long after, he started exposing himself to other children in the commune, which caught the attention of the leadership council, and rumors spread that Prater was now molesting other kids. After talking with Prater, a member of the leadership council approached his mom and told her what Prater had said about being molested. "But they dismissed it," Mary Prater recalls. "They told me he was lying."

Alarmed, Prater's mom found him and asked him what happened. "I said, 'Did this happen, Jaime? Tell me what happened,'" Mary Prater says. "I don't remember what he said but he was crying. And I said, 'They say you're lying. Did you lie?' And then he said, whispering, 'Yeah, Mom, I lied.' But I knew it wasn't true. I knew he had been pressured into saying it."

When she discussed the matter with her husband, they decided that if their son said he was lying, that was the end of the matter. But over the next few years, Prater continued

to expose himself to other children, and to seek the company of older men. Prater's parents didn't know what to do. His mom was convinced he was acting out because he'd been molested, and pushed for therapy. But the council said no. They insisted he'd made up the story for attention. The only answer, they said, was to isolate him, which they did when he turned 13 by pulling him out of the commune's school and making him take his classes in a closet at the Magnolia building several blocks away.

"The truth is, the person who had molested Jaime was set to marry one of the pastor's daughters, and if this ever came out, it would create a scandal," Prater's mom says. "The right thing would have been to deal with him, but instead they sent Jaime away. They had decided he was the problem."

Mary Prater says she deeply regrets the decision and wishes she would have stood up to the council. "It's hard to describe the pressure and fear we felt," she says. "They are your landlord, your employer. They have complete control over you, and I knew that no matter what I said, they had already made their decision."

Prater says the three and a half years he spent in isolation harmed him far more than any sexual abuse. Kids he had grown up with would no longer talk to him, or even look his way. He desperately craved his dad's approval, and had always sensed he was a disappointment, but now he had no doubt. Within the hierarchy of the commune, he had cast a dark cloud over the family.

"I would sit in that little closet where I spent six hours a day, just me and my tutor, and I'd hear kids outside playing, music coming out of people's rooms, parents talking behind closed doors, the clanking of pans down in the communal kitchen, and I just wanted to be with them. I felt like I was dead, like I'd been buried alive," he says. "I thought it would be a weeklong thing, but then it turned into a month, and then it turned into years."

When Prater was 14, his grandmother (who wasn't affiliated with the Jesus People) decided she would rescue him, at least for the day. She took him downtown to see *The Phantom of the Opera*, which had just come to Chicago.

"I just connected to it right away, it was like someone was singing my song," Prater says. "I saw myself in the main character, this man who was ugly and unfit for society, and because he believed what they said about him, he lived in the underworld of the opera house. I just felt like, *This is me, this is who I am.*"

The musical took over Prater's life. Back at Friendly Towers he listened to the soundtrack nonstop, painted the walls of his room black, and re-created the entire set of the play complete with a staircase made of papier-mâché, a falling chandelier, and even a metal cage around his bed to replicate the Phantom's lair. "I felt like I had a friend and someone who understood me," Prater says. "That music probably saved my life."

Prater's parents, meanwhile, were becoming increasingly concerned about the effects of his isolation, and talked about sending him away to a Christian reform school. His mom broached the subject and Prater told her no. Instead, they compromised and sent



him to the Farm, where for three months over two successive winters he helped with chores, like fixing the lodge. To Prater it felt like a labor camp.

Finally, Prater's mother had had enough. She worried they were driving her son to madness, or suicide. She went to the council and told them that her son's isolation had to stop. To her surprise, they agreed, and he was welcomed back in the community.

"My classmates were like, 'Where have you been?' They had no idea what had happened," Prater says. "To them, I had just disappeared for the last three years."

Over time, Prater concluded that his isolation had as much to do with his emerging homosexuality as his allegations of sexual abuse, and so he decided to "butch it up." He got rid of all his musical soundtracks and became vocally anti-gay. When he asked for a job at *Cornerstone*, Mama Dawn asked to meet with him at the magazine's offices, just across the street from where he had grown up.

By this point in the mid-'90s, Jesus People had shed many of its eccentricities. It no longer allowed [adult spankings](#), [practiced exorcisms](#) of children, or [reassigned kids to other families](#). It talked about these practices as innocent mistakes, growing pains in the quest to build a fully functioning Christian commune.

It had also built significant business holdings. Lakefront Roofing was grossing as much as \$12 million a year. *Cornerstone* was one the biggest Christian music festivals in the U.S., drawing 20,000 people a year.

Mama Dawn began by asking Prater, who was now 21, about his love of *Phantom of the Opera*. She was warm and patient, but there was something in her eyes, watching him carefully, that made it impossible for Prater to completely relax. He knew what she was getting at. She wanted to know if he was gay.

He explained that the musical had spoken to him at a time in which he had felt alone and ugly. "I never knew that," Dawn said, and she seemed moved. Prater made a point of mentioning that he no longer cared for Barbra Streisand and didn't like musicals generally. It was just a phase. Convinced he wasn't gay, Mama Dawn gave him a job at *Cornerstone* as a graphic artist.

Over the next few years, Prater wondered if he could stay within the commune and be true to himself. He still believed in Jesus, but he doubted so much of what he had grown up believing, and he was becoming more comfortable with the fact he was gay — he'd known that since he was 4. Slowly, he began to realize something that maybe he should have known all along: He didn't belong.



**“IT’S ALMOST LIKE  
I’M ATTACKING MY  
FAMILY, THE ONLY  
HOME I EVER KNEW.”**

Courtesy Jaime Prater

**By the time** Prater decided to leave in 1999, many of the longtime members had left, including his parents and siblings. Where the council had once made leaving very difficult, it now put up little fight when someone wanted to go, partly because of criticisms from the broader Christian community. In his first few years after leaving the commune in August 1999, Prater cast about, searching for identity and purpose. His entire life, Mama Dawn and the council had made all his decisions for him. He never had to think about money, or paying bills, or what he’d eat. Now that was all up to him, which was both liberating and crippling.

Eventually, he concluded he couldn’t move forward until he reckoned with his past. At the urging of a film professor at a local college Prater was attending, he decided to make a documentary about growing up in JPUSA. Unaware that anyone else had suffered sexual abuse there, he saw it as nothing more than an exploration of his childhood.

In March 2013 he created a private Facebook page, inviting 250 former JPUSA members to share their stories with him; he posted a rough cut with initial interviews in the hopes of soliciting more. “It was like I literally opened the floodgates,” Prater says. “People started flooding my email, flooding the (Facebook) group with stories.”

Almost all of the stories dealt with sexual abuse. In one of the most harrowing, Prater says a man in his early forties told him that as a boy, he was physically and sexually abused so many times by so many people over a 10-year period, he didn't know where to start. He had been taken from his mother as a baby and raised by a council member. He told Prater he could remember sitting naked in a bathroom with a DCFS investigator, telling her that the bruising and scabs on his body had come from playing sports and bug bites, something he had been coached to say.

"I hadn't set out to make a movie about sex abuse," Prater says, "but that was the catalyst."

Prater had never made a documentary, and had only a rudimentary understanding of filmmaking. With no financing, he raised nearly \$7,000 on Kickstarter and started flying all over the country to hear the stories that had come in via Facebook. In Minnesota, a girl he'd grown up with told him about the terrifying dreams she'd had as a child of men having sex with her mother while she was made to watch.

Erik Johnson, a boy who was adopted by Micki Johnson in the late 1970s, said he went to the building where the single brothers lived to get a mountain bike and a 27-year-old lured him into his room show him karate moves. Instead, Johnson said the man performed oral sex on him. In another interview Prater filmed, Angel Harold said a teenager began molesting her when she was 9 years old. She later told me that a pastor forced her to perform oral sex on him, and eventually raped her.

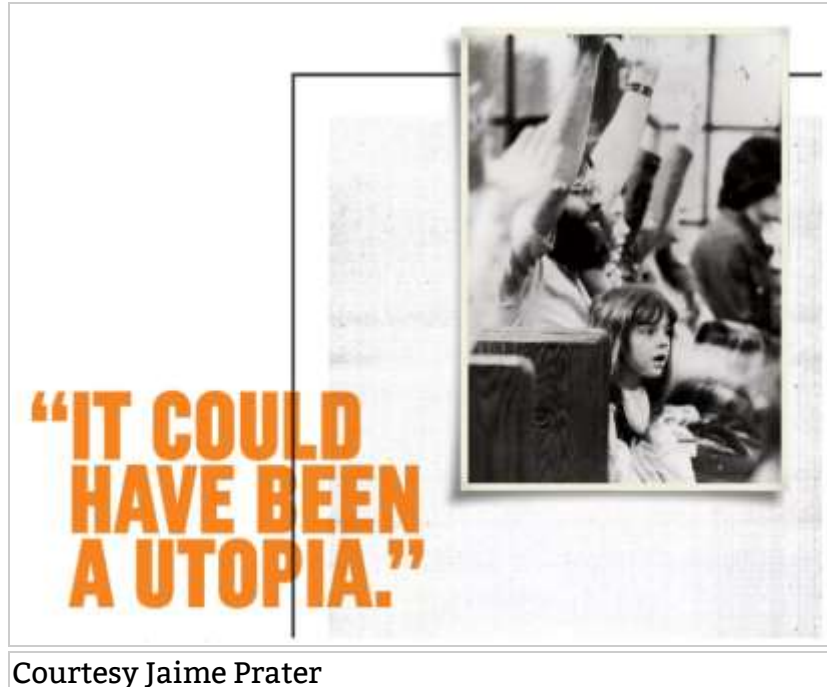
"Here was this leader telling you that you're beautiful, you're pretty, you're not doing anything wrong because you're doing what you're told. I actually remember feeling completely safe, like, *Ahh, I'm being a good girl*," Angel Harold says. "I remember thinking, *So this is what little girls do with their leaders. This is my new role. Mom was made a cook. Dad was made a painter. And this is what I do.*"

Former commune members who had been adults when the alleged abuse occurred were shocked at what Prater had uncovered. "We never knew what was going on with other families," says Micki Johnson. "You might have known your kid had a certain problem, but that's it. We had no idea how widespread it was."

As Prater gathered more stories, the gravity of what he had unearthed began to descend upon him. For a year he sat on the footage, unsure of what to do, torn between the loyalty he still felt to the community that raised him and anger at what he believed had happened there.

In December 2013, with the editing of the film nearly over, Prater sunk into a deep depression, even considering suicide. Most disturbing to him was how many times people had gone to the JPUSA council and the Evangelical Covenant Church to report abuse. Again and again, alleged victims were told that the council would handle the matter internally. And almost without exception, that meant finding a way to keep victims silent, while doing nothing to reprimand the accused.

As soon as the film started making waves, triggering the defections of prominent families and attracting the attention of the national press, JPUSA tried to silence Prater, threatening him twice with a defamation lawsuit. Those threats came and went, but Prater says JPUSA's attorneys told him they would begin negotiations on a settlement related to his suit against the church only if he changed key parts of his film, excising any abuse allegations against John Herrin Jr., and



Courtesy Jaime Prater

tracked down every copy of the film. He complied with their request to edit the film, but he refused to take it off the internet.

"I've lost more than I've gained for speaking out," Prater told me. The making of the film consumed his life for two years, eventually causing his partner to leave him. People he's known since childhood stopped talking to him.

Friends who still live in the commune were angry about the way the film depicted JPUSA. They didn't deny that abuse happened, but they questioned the assertion that the leadership council had known about it and covered it up. They also wondered how many of the 70 incidents were committed by children or teenagers. "I'm not saying there weren't cases of adults with children, I'm not saying that didn't happen," an adult child of a member of the leadership council who still lives at JPUSA told me. "But it's hard for me to believe a grown man could walk into the room of a child of the opposite sex. Everyone would have noticed."

Last July, Prater's lawyers called him with an offer from JPUSA. They would begin to negotiate a settlement if he promised to stop talking to the press.

"They don't realize that they're not going to shut me up with money. That's not why I'm doing this," he said. "I want an acknowledgment of what happened, and some kind of accountability. That's the only way so many people can heal, and it's the only way I can be assured something like this won't happen there again."

**On a cool spring morning** last year, Prater and I met not far from Friendly Towers. He showed me the first building he'd called home and the place where he'd been isolated for three years. As we walked, we could hear children outside the JPUSA day care, waiting for their parents to get off work.

From the outside, it seemed like little had changed, but Prater told me that wasn't the case. Dozens of families had left. The annual Cornerstone Festival, once the biggest Christian rock festival in America, folded in 2012 due to poor attendance. The commune had also relaxed many of its rules that had grown out of the Shepherding Movement (such as the buddy system), largely to contain a mass exodus that began in the mid-'90s.

Many who left are still trying to come to grips with their years at Friendly Towers. For the earliest members, the continued existence of JPUSA is a testament to good ideas gone bad.

"It could have been a utopia," John Prater says. "It should've been an upside-down community, but it's not. It's a top-down community like any other business. And that's not the gospel Jesus preached."

It's been more than a decade since Angel Harold and her husband, Chris, left, and Angel says she's only beginning to understand the extent of the damage wrought by the sexual abuse she suffered, some of which has only recently begun to resurface.

"It's taken us both a really long time to rebuild our lives to figure out who we are," Angel Harold says. "We had to learn to think for ourselves. And in a lot of ways, we've been lucky. There are so many people who are worse off who have left."

What the Prater and Harold families wonder is how so much abuse, both physical and sexual, went on for so long under the noses of authorities in one of the biggest cities in America. While the Department of Children and Family Services sporadically visited Friendly Towers, and one or two abuse allegations made their way to the police, no formal investigation uncovered what occurred there.

Longtime members I talked to say they blame themselves for not speaking up. But the victims I talked to blame the structure of the commune itself, and their parents, their "buddies," and ultimately the leadership council for not doing more to protect them.

"You can't complain in an environment like that," says Lalich. "If you complain, you're isolated, humiliated, physically punished ... and once you've been through that a few times, you're going to learn to keep your mouth shut. It becomes a self-sealing system. It's an environment that's absolutely closed in on itself."

In the end, one of the alleged victims told me, it came down to power and preservation. Even today, the leadership council sits at the top of a multimillion-dollar business empire, to say nothing of the real estate it owns with the ECC throughout Chicago. Several members told me JPUSA's affiliation with the ECC has allowed it to buy property with what essentially amounts to ECC financing.

"It was like, 'Look at this thing we built. Do we want this to have a tarnished name? Do we want to lose it?'" says Tamzen Trott, whose father remains at JPUSA. "And so instead you cover it up, and the more it happens, the deeper it gets."



**The day after** I met Prater, I visited Friendly Towers one last time. I had already been by several times, but on each visit I was told no one would be available for an interview (JPUSA leadership declined to respond to subsequent requests for comment made in writing and over the phone about the lawsuits and abuse allegations). Once again, the



Jamie Pratter  
Bryan Dale for BuzzFeed News

woman at the front desk told me they weren't giving tours or interviews, but if I hurried I could catch the tail end of a worship service across the street. She pointed to Everybody's Coffee, owned and operated by JPUSA, and said that if I pushed through the double doors in the back I would find the chapel.

I followed her instructions and took a seat on a metal folding chair in the back. The room, which looked like an empty warehouse, had a dark, cavernous feel, except for the stage, which was bathed in an amber glow. There were about 200 people in the congregation, and for all that might have changed about JPUSA, one thing hadn't: They looked nothing like the typical church crowd. There were aging hippies, a mom with elaborate tattoo sleeves running

up both arms, and couples with dreads and gauges and nose rings. Most of them lived across the street at Friendly Towers. The pastor, who I would later learn had baptized Prater, wore his graying hair in a ponytail, his jeans loose and baggy. He spoke softly of forgiveness and redemption. It could have been any Sunday at any church in America.

As the service ended, the congregation filtered into Everybody's Coffee, and eventually, they started to make their way back to Friendly Towers.

I watched the children follow their parents and wondered if they would ever learn about the things that happened in the place they called home. Perhaps the pending lawsuits would force some kind of reckoning. Or maybe the Jesus People would simply move forward, as they had always done, trying to forget the past.